Teaching Latin Inscriptions with Confidence

Latin inscriptions can be a great way teach about Roman life and to try out Latin skills using real Roman writing. This guide for teachers introduces the basics of the study of Latin inscriptions (known as Latin Epigraphy). It starts with an introduction to some of the different reasons that Romans made inscriptions. Then it gives a quick guide to reading inscriptions, including:

- A guide to the notation used in epigraphic publications
- A guide to the abbreviations that Romans used in their inscriptions
- A list of places to find more information about inscriptions

The guide also includes a series of practice exercises to try out the skills involved as well as activities that you can use to introduce these concepts to your students.
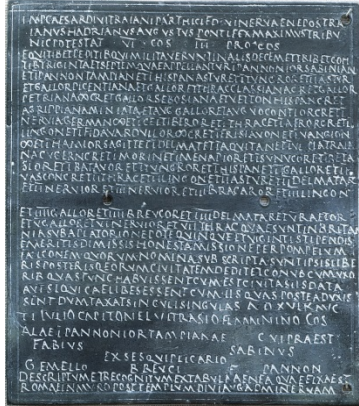
Types of inscription

Image	Type	Examples
	Labelling	• Makers' marks
	Honorific	• Thanks • Congratulations • Commemoration • Self-promotion

	Votive	• Thanks to deity • Promise to deity • Request to deity
	Legal	• Weights and Measures • Citizenship decrees • Laws • Decrees
	Funerary	• Epitaphs • Columbarium plaques • Property markers • Ash urns
	Graffiti	

You can find out more about some of the different types of inscriptions, including rarer kinds like gold glass and sling bullets in the Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions Project's Featured Objects section: http://latininscriptions.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/featured/

To introduce students to the range of different kinds of Latin inscriptions, you can use the *Roman Writing Matching Activity* cards.
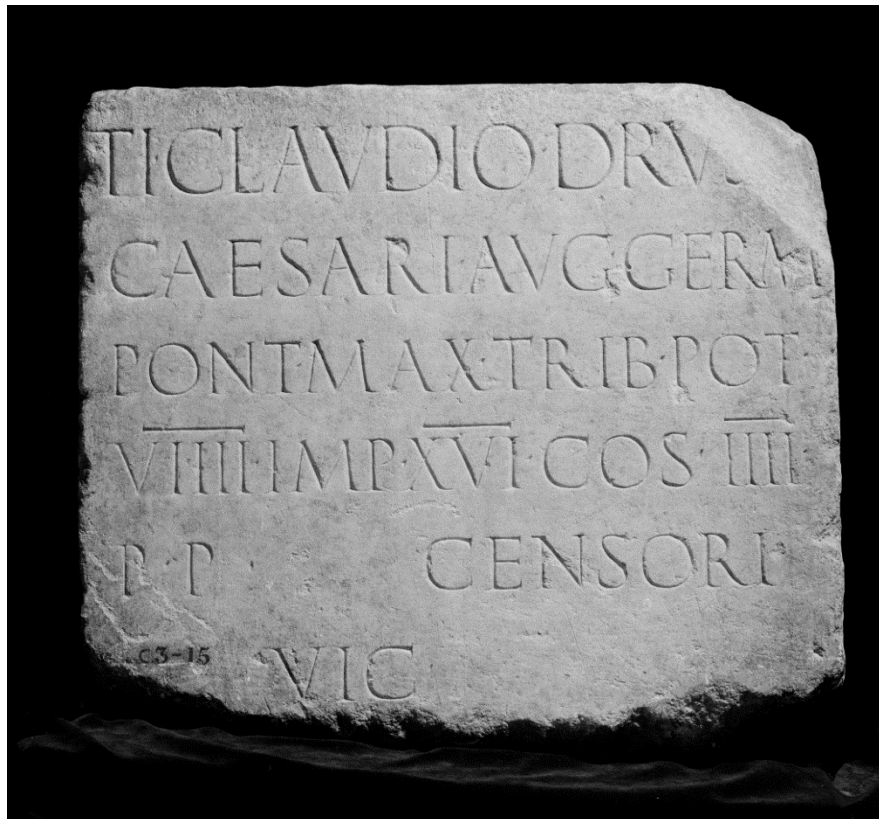
Easy Epigraphy: decoding brackets and symbols

Epigraphic publications use shorthand to record what inscriptions say. Because small changes in the text of Latin can make a big difference to what it means, it is important for editors to show which letters are clear on the inscription and which have been supplied by their own interpretation.

Brackets are used to mark off sections of text that have been subject to editorial intervention. The type of brackets shows what changes have been made.

Symbol	Used for	Inscription says	The epigrapher writes
()	An abbreviated word, which the editor has written out in full	AVG	Aug(ustus)
[ ]	Letters lost through damage, but supplied by editor	VRNIA	[Calp]urnia
[[ ]]	Letters erased in antiquity, but can still be read clearly	~~GETA~~	[[Geta]]
(VAC.)	Marking a deliberately blank space	D M	D (vac.) M
⌐ ¬	Correcting a mistake made by the original inscriber	INSIRVXIT	ins⌐t¬ruxit
{ }	Letters carved in error, which the editor has removed		
< >	Letters omitted in error, which the editor has added		
+++	Damaged traces of letters which cannot be recognised; each cross represents one letter.		
<u>ABC</u>	Letters read by a previous editor; currently invisible		

Deciphering an inscription

This example shows epigraphic notation in action.

Text:	Edition:	**Translation:**
TI·CLAVDIO·DRVS **CAESARI·AVG·GERM** **PONT·MAX·TRIB·POT·** **VIIII·IMP·XVI·COS·IIII** **P·P· CENSORI** **VIC**	Ti(berio) ° Claudio ° Drus[i f(ilio)] / Caesari ° Aug(usto) ° Germ(anico) / pont(ifici) ° max(imo) ° trib(unicia) ° pot(estate) ° / VIIII ° imp(eratori) ° XVI ° co(n)s(uli) ° IIII ° / ^{5} p(atri) ° p(atriae) ° (vac.) censori ° / vic(us) [-]	'To Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, son of Drusus, supreme pontiff, holder of tribunician power for the 9th time, hailed victorious general for the 16th time, consul for the 4th time, father of his county, censor. The [-] district (set this up)'.

To practice these skills, try the *DIY Edit your own Inscription activity* in this pack.

Reading inscriptions

Space was often at a premium on inscriptions, so Romans had their own shorthand for writing them. Sometimes words run into each other without spaces, so the first task is to identify the individual words. Small dots (called interpuncts) often appear between words. Not all inscriptions have these and sometimes they are used inconsistently, but they can be helpful in picking out individual words.

Commonly used names, words and phrases were often abbreviated. Epigraphic publications (like the example above) will often expand abbreviations for you. However, it is helpful to know the most common abbreviations.

First names (Praenomina)

Abbreviation	Name
L.	Lucius
P.	Publius
C.	Gaius
M.	Marcus
Ti.	Tiberius
A.	Aulus
M'	Manius
CN	Gnaeus
D.	Decimus
Q.	Quintus

Common titles

Abbreviation	Title
PONT. MAX.	*Pontifex Maximus,* Chief pontiff
TRIB. POT	*tribunicia potestas,* with tribunician power
IMP.	*Imperator*
COS.	*consul,* the highest political office
P.P.	*pater patriae,* 'Father of the country'

Funerary formulae

Abbreviation	Full phrase	Translation
D.M.	Dis Manibus	To the gods below
F	Filius/Filia	Son/daughter
Vix. Ann.	Vixit Annos	lived for … years
M	Menses	…months
D	Dies	…days
S.T.T.L.	Sit Tibi Terra Levis	May the earth lie lightly on you
B.M.	Bene Merenti	Well deserving
F	Fecit	Made this
H.S.E	Hic Situs/Sita Est	is buried here
V.A.P.M	vixit annos plus minus	Lived more or less … years

The "Cracking Codes" PowerPoint and worksheet are designed to introduce these abbreviations and practice reading real funerary inscriptions with Latin learners. The presentation notes include full translations and point out interesting facts about these objects.

Reading a tombstone

Roman tombstones are often highly formulaic and (with a bit of practice) easy to read.

To read a typical tombstone:

1. Look for name(s) in the dative case. This is usually the person (or people) for whom the gravestone was erected. In the example above, the name is **Decimus Aemilius Vitalis**
2. Look for name(s) in the nominative case. This is usually the person (or people) who set up the gravestone. Sometimes the verb Fecit/Fecerunt is included to make this clear.
   In the example above, this phrase is **Clodia Helice Mater Fecit:**

3. Look for any familiar formulae and abbreviations. In this case:

    = Vixit annos

    = dies (you can tell the difference between this and the D. that stands for Decimus in the first line by context)
4. Translate any phrases that remain and put it all together

The full translation for the example above is "For Decimus Aemilius Vitalis. He lived for 25 years, 48 days. Clodia Helice, his mother, set this up."

The *Tombstones and the Dative Case* worksheet and *Cracking Codes* presentation can be used to introduce your students to reading funerary inscriptions.

Teaching with objects

Latin inscriptions are as important for what they tell us as objects as for the writing on them. Teaching with objects is most effective when it encourages learners to look closely at the objects and think through what they can tell us.

Drawing activities can be great for getting students to look closely at objects and ask more detailed questions. Try:

- Sketching the object and annotating the sketch with things like size colour and personal impressions. Describe what is being depicted in any images and make a clear transcription of the words.
- Observational drawing – looking closely and trying to represent the inscription as accurately as possible. To really focus on the object, you can try drawing without looking at the paper
- Drawing and filling in missing or broken parts (this can include imagining colours, since many ancient stone sculptures and inscriptions were brightly painted)

Drawing is often best done while looking at the objects themselves in the museum. However, you can experiment with working from images on the Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions catalogue.

Some objects in the AshLI catalogue have been photographed using a process called RTI (you can find them at: http://latininscriptions.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/collections/rti/). This allows you to drag the light source around and view the texture of the inscription. To view an RTI image, click on the "RTI image" link for the object. Then click the ⊞ icon to view full screen and the 💡 icon to move the light source by clicking on the image and dragging the mouse. This should give a clear sense of the texture of the object's surface.

Research activities are another good way to encourage detailed thinking about objects. Try:

- Asking students to do research from an information source with a strict time limit. What were they able to learn in the time and what questions do they still have about the object?
- Debating the objects: imagine you are a museum curator and you can add one of these objects to your collection. Which one should it be and why? Think about what is more important in a museum object: beauty, connections to famous people, showing the lives of ordinary people, how much money it is worth or something else entirely? Have a class debate to decide between the most popular objects.
- Look at the people behind the objects and write a story from their perspective. What did the object mean to them? Work in some facts from your research and feel free to invent details.
- Or imagine the life of the object itself. What would it say if it could talk? What kinds of things has it experienced?
- Two truths and a lie – Go round the class asking students to pick out some facts about the object and try to fool everyone else by slipping in one plausible lie. Get the class to vote on which is the fib.
- Write their own museum label for the object – decide what facts are most important about the object and how to capture people's imagination in a small space.

- Make a poster about your favourite object using eye-catching images and clear explanatory text to help people understand it.
- Make connections between objects. Take a group of objects and sort them by the things they have in common.
- Arrange the objects on a timeline or on a map. Think about how large the Roman empire was and how long it lasted.

The Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions catalogue pages offer detailed information about the objects. Catalogue pages are designed to be detailed enough for experts and professionals to use in their research, but might be useful for practising the skills of skim reading and picking out the most relevant information.

For slightly easier research material, there is a set of fact sheets about selected Ashmolean Latin inscriptions included as part of this pack.

Finding out more:

The Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions Project (AshLI):

- Web catalogue and teacher resources: http://latininscriptions.ashmus.ox.ac.uk
- Blog: http://www.ashmolean.org/ashwpress/latininscriptions or search 'Reading, Writing, Romans'
- Twitter: @AshmoleanLatin

Warwick Epigraphy:

- Links to Inscription Collections and Resources: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/postgrads/modules/epigraphy/bibliog/online/
- Twitter: @W_Epigraphy

Roman Inscriptions of Britain (RIB):

- http://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org

Curse Tablets of Roman Britain:

- http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/

Letters from Hadrian's Wall (Vindolanda):

- http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/

Alison Cooley, *The Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy* (CUP 2012)

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